ロスト・ユニバース②

妖夢　蠢く

神坂　一

イラスト　義仲翔子

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Lost Universe 2: The Crawling Dream Apparition

By Hajime Kanazaka

Cover and Interior Illustrations by Shoko Yoshinaka

Machine Translated and Edited by Eff_Efferson (March 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Prologue

KABOOM!

"What the—!?"

Kane jolted upright in his bunk at the thunderous sound that shook the room. He was in his private quarters aboard his spaceship, the Swordbreaker, and the cabin was currently wrapped in dim darkness.

"Don't tell me—an artillery hit!?"

He threw his cape over his striped pajamas and jumped to his feet. It hadn't been so long since he'd fought a ship sent by the criminal syndicate Nightmare on the far edge of the galaxy. A reprisal strike wouldn't be surprising.

But the vibration had been too weak for artillery.

He reached out and switched on the communication display embedded in the wall. Immediately, the screen lit up with the image of a silver-haired girl. She wore fantasy-style clothing that completely ignored any sense of the era, and though her appearance had an uncanny realism, she was nothing more than a holographic projection.

This was Canal—the controller of the Swordbreaker. She was something closer to the ship's "will" than a main computer, and she usually took this holographic form.

"Canal! What was that just now!?"

Unusually, she hesitated for a moment at his question—then finally spoke, as if steeling herself.

"—The pressure cooker exploded."

A brief silence.

"...Huh...?"

Kane stared blankly. Canal continued with visible reluctance.

"...In other words... Milly went into the kitchen saying she was going to 'cook something,' and... she blew up the pressure cooker..."

"What—!? Is Milly okay!?"

"Yes... well..."

Canal still seemed hesitant.

"...She was wearing... her powered armor..."

Silence. Extended, heavy silence.

"...You mean to tell me..."

Kane finally managed a murmur.

"Milly was cooking in full powered armor, and somehow managed to blow up the pressure cooker..."

Canal gave an uncertain nod on screen.

More silence.

"Are you feeling alright...?"

He would normally have been furious, but this time he just looked genuinely baffled.

"...I thought the same thing, so I ran a self-diagnostic... I'm perfectly normal..."

Kane scratched his head.

"...Anyway... patch me through to the kitchen..."

"...A... alright..."

The screen went dark. A few moments of ringing, and then—

"Hiii, Kane!"

Milly appeared on screen with a bright smile on her face. And sure enough, exactly as Canal had said, she was fully suited up in powered armor.

"This is a pretty nice kitchen, you know. I thought there'd only be an auto-cooker, but it's got everything!"

"...Yeah..."

Kane gave a vague answer. Truth be told, he'd stocked the kitchen with a decent assortment of cookware for a rather troubling reason—specifically, a burning desire to personally cut ingredients with his own two hands. But he had no intention of explaining that right now.

"...But Kane, what's with that outfit? A cape over pajamas?"

"Obviously, it's a matter of a man's dignity."

"...I... see..."

"Anyway... I hear the pressure cooker exploded..."

At that, a single bead of sweat traced a path down Milly's cheek inside her visor.

"W... well, I mean, I was just making pizza, right—"

"How does making pizza result in a pressure cooker exploding!?"

"That's... um..."

Milly thought for a moment, then raised one finger and flashed a cheerful smile.

"The soul of Chinese cooking is heat control, right?"

"WHEN DID PIZZA BECOME CHINESE FOOD!?"

"...Well, you know, not everything in the universe can be explained by science."

...Maybe hiring her as my assistant was a mistake after all...

Only now, far too late, did that thought cross Kane's mind.

* * *

CRASH!

A tremendous roar and shudder rocked the entire ship.

"What is it!?"

Clinging desperately to his chair, the captain couldn't help but cry out.

"Artillery fire! Likely space pirates!"

"Space pirates!? Out in a backwater area like this!?"

The report made his voice go rough. The interstellar freighter Sleeping Camel was currently navigating near a small planet with dust rings and rocky debris. This was a deserted star system well off the main space lanes—and the ship wouldn't even be passing through here if not for the sudden change-of-destination orders it had received.

And now, of all places, space pirates had appeared.

"They must have been hiding in the shadow of the rock clusters!"

"Light-beam communication from the pirate ship!"

Another crew member called out.

"'Stop your engines or we will open fire!'"

"Send a distress signal!"

"No good! We're being jammed!"

"Damn..."

The captain ground his teeth. Their ship was large, but it was a freighter with only token armaments. The crew numbered barely ten, and none of them had any combat experience. Any fool could see that resistance was futile.

But surrendering and hoping for mercy seemed equally naive.

Which left only one option—

"Can we shake them off somehow!?"

The panicking captain raised his voice. Using the drifting rocks as cover was an option, but the pirate ship was between them and the rocks.

As his eyes swept frantically across the main display, a small planet caught his eye.

"That planet!"

He found himself shouting before he could think.

"Dive toward that planet's surface and lose them—or at least buy time!"

It was hardly a brilliant plan, but in their confusion, neither the captain nor his crew could think of anything better.

"Understood!"

The helmsman answered with something close to a shriek and threw the engines to full thrust.

BOOM! CRASH!

In rapid succession, sound and vibration hammered the hull.

"Artillery barrage from the pirates!"

Nobody had time to acknowledge the obvious report.

And then—

BOOM!

With an especially powerful shudder, every light in the control room went out at once. Darkness visited. Someone called out a name—probably a family member or a lover.

A moment later, the emergency power kicked on and bathed the room in crimson. The blood-red hue and the cacophony of alarms did nothing but amplify the dread.

"Direct hit on the engines—catastrophic damage!"

"Separate them!"

"Understood!"

Thud. A small vibration as the engines were jettisoned from the hull. And then—

BOOM!

A third massive shudder rocked the ship.

"The separated engines exploded! Ship controls unresponsive!"

Slammed forward by the shockwave of the exploding engines directly behind them, the ship accelerated helplessly toward the planet filling the display.

The planet swelled larger and larger, moment by moment.

—Why?

Amid the shouting and screaming and alarms, that single word was all that filled the captain's mind. Not regret. Not thoughts of family. Just that one unanswerable question.

The interstellar freighter Sleeping Camel vanished without a trace after receiving orders to change its destination. That is all that would ever be recorded.

* * *

"—What the hell is this?"

Someone's raspy voice crackled through a low-quality speaker.

Beyond the visor stretched a dry, pitch-black expanse of land and starless void. The only beings on this unnamed little planet were the dozen-odd spacesuited members of the pirate crew.

Of course, none of the freighter's crew could have survived. with that timing, even if someone had made it to an escape pod, the planet's gravity would have caught them and they'd have crashed somewhere. Those old escape pods had barely enough thrust to drift in open space.

Some fool had scored a direct hit on the engines with the main cannon, ruining what should have been a tidy prize. The hull at least hadn't exploded, but the freighter had plowed straight into the planet's surface.

The crater below them, with its enormous wreckage huddled at the bottom, was the evidence.

Even so, they'd come down to see if anything salvageable remained—but the cargo turned out to be nothing but machine parts, now so much worthless scrap.

However, that wasn't even the main problem.

The problem was this planet itself.

The crashed freighter had gouged into the surface soil and sunk into something beneath it. A structure of some kind, underground, with metal walls.

"...It's a... building... right? Underground..."

Someone murmured quietly.

"Anyone with eyes can see that."

Another voice answered curtly.

The pirates found themselves thinking of those old space-horror movies that had been popular years ago—the ones about expeditions on remote planets who found alien ruins and got slaughtered by some monstrous creature. Clichéd stuff that had made them laugh out loud at the time. But now that they were standing in the exact same position, it wasn't especially funny.

The unknown design, the unfamiliar metal—whatever it was had clearly not been able to withstand the direct impact of a spacecraft. One section of the wall had been ripped open, revealing a gaping darkness beneath.

One of the pirates drifted toward the crack as if drawn by something, shining his searchlight into the void below—

"...What... is that...?"

He murmured, barely above a whisper.

"What's in there?"

Another pirate called out. The first man crouched and peered into the depths of the darkness, then said,

"—A spaceship. Never seen this model before..."

"—! You don't mean—it can't be what they say in the stories—"

A third pirate's voice dropped to a ragged whisper.

"—A Lost Ship..."

* * *

Her own room, so familiar, looked oddly foreign to her now.

Strange how different a place looked when stripped of all its furniture.

The soft beige walls, the afternoon sunlight drifting in through the window—all of it felt inexplicably cold.

"...Goodbye... my little home..."

Standing in her trench coat with a faraway look, Milly spoke quietly to the empty room.

"I really wanted to stay longer, but because Kane is being a cheapskate about my salary, I have to move out..."

"Would you cut it out!"

Kane, standing in the doorway clutching a cardboard box, couldn't stop himself.

"After making me help you move and everything, you're doing that insufferable melodramatic monologue! Jeez... I've been the one struggling to make ends meet ever since I took on another mouth to feed!"

But even at his outburst, Milly just smiled pleasantly.

"Now, now. They say the trials of youth are worth seeking out."

"...Want me to give you some trials?"

Milly's smile froze.

"...K... Kane, your eyes aren't smiling, you know..."

"..."

"...I'll carry some boxes too..."

Milly's shoulders fell, and she reached for the pile of cardboard boxes stacked in the doorway.

* * *

"...Hmm... is there nothing really worthwhile..."

Staring at a small display screen, Kane muttered to himself.

He was in the cockpit of the Swordbreaker, docked at the orbital port.

"...Kane, if you don't hurry up, the orbital port is going to charge you late fees," Canal reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

He stayed slumped in his pilot's seat, brushing off her words. It had been nearly an hour since he'd returned from helping Milly move, and he'd been staring at the screen the whole time.

He was hunting for their next job.

Among the many services available through interstellar communications, there was a paid information network where clients posted requests for trouble contractors. The listings included a rough job description, the fee offered, and contact information—and there were hundreds of them, if not more.

He'd filtered by jobs within reach in under a week, but even so, the requests numbered far beyond a hundred or two. And of course, the best jobs weren't just sitting around unclaimed—what remained was mostly low-paying work or high-danger assignments.

"...Why not just pick something at random?" Milly said, appearing behind him without a sound and peering at the screen over his shoulder.

"Easy for you to say..."

"—Oh, what about that one? Job K-105. The fee looks decent."

"...Listen..." Kane sighed. "Jobs like that are usually sketchy."

"Sketchy?"

"Yeah. No job description, just a fee and a contact number—those are almost always smuggling or illegal immigration gigs."

"Hold on! That's a proper crime!"

"Sure is," Kane answered without a hint of concern.

"Word is some of them are so dangerous they'll ruin your life. People have asked around out of curiosity, found they couldn't back out, and thrown their lives away that way."

"...Is it really okay for that information to be on the interstellar network...?"

"Of course not. The interstellar police do raid it from time to time, and apparently someone even tried to take them to court. But the network's position is that they're just providing a space for information exchange, and that controlling the content would constitute a privacy violation or something. If they actually shut the service down, trouble contractors like us would be out of work overnight—and some of those people would probably turn straight to crime."

"...I see... it's complicated, isn't it..."

Milly frowned and nodded.

"But if you don't pick a job soon, we'll end up paying late fees," Canal added dryly.

"I know, I know..."

Too much information was just as troublesome as too little—you had to sift through an avalanche of listings to find what you actually needed.

He sent a glance toward Canal.

"...Hey, anything you'd recommend?"

She sighed.

"...You could have just asked me from the start... Let's see—how about C-011?"

"C-011, huh..." Kane pulled up the listing. "...The fee's pretty low though..."

"But the conditions are good. They cover propellant costs and accommodation. Insurance and guarantees seem solid too."

"...Oh. You're right."

He'd only been checking the posted fee and had neatly missed all the fine print.

"What's the job?" Milly asked.

"Escorting a freighter," Kane answered.

"...Sounds pretty unglamorous..."

"Fair enough. ...Laglude Corporation... I've never heard of them."

"They're the largest—in fact the only—major conglomerate in the Winaran star system, at galactic coordinate 4-3-B. 'From socks to battleships,' as they say."

"Interesting... alright, Canal, patch me through to them."

"I don't mind, but... can we please leave port first? The late fees are eating at me..."

"Fine, fine. Handle the control tower and departure procedures."

"Understood!"

Canal responded with bright enthusiasm.

And so—the Swordbreaker set out again.

Planet Regn

A single blue star blazing against a backdrop of darkness and scattered light.

"...Wow... what a beautiful planet..."

Milly couldn't help but exclaim at the image projected on the display.

Planet Regn—the fourth planet of the Winaran star system. Far out on the frontier, but this was where the job was.

After contacting Laglude Corporation, they had ultimately agreed to take the escort assignment.

"Apparently it used to be a tourist destination," Canal said, also gazing at the display—which was of course meaningless for a hologram, but she seemed to have an odd perfectionism about acting and posture.

"But it never quite took off, so they tried industrial development too. That didn't work out either, and after a series of mergers and acquisitions of failing companies, the current Laglude Corporation was born."

As they talked, the planet grew larger on the screen. Soon, a small silver point became visible above it.

"Is that it?"

"Checking now."

The main display switched and magnified the silver speck into a massive metal disk—at least ten kilometers across. Various spacecraft of all sizes were docked at points around its circumference.

This was one of Planet Regn's orbital ports.

"No doubt about it. This is Valharie, the orbital port owned by Laglude Corporation."

"Owned by Laglude?"

Kane blinked. "...So that's why they specified where to dock..."

The contract had included favorable terms for Kane's crew—docking fees and accommodations covered by Laglude. In practice, the company was saving on escort fees by simply offering use of its own facilities.

After checking in and completing procedures, the Swordbreaker eased into a gate at the edge of the orbital port.

"...Hey, isn't that a police ship?" Milly murmured, catching sight of a dark blue hull docked at a nearby gate.

"It is an interstellar police ship," Canal confirmed matter-of-factly.

"...What are they doing way out here...?"

"Pirate hunting," Kane said simply.

"Kane, stop trying to scare me!"

"I'm not trying to scare you—it's just the facts. Did you seriously not realize? This job has pirate involvement."

Milly was left speechless.

Kane sighed. "...Think about it. Why did Laglude want to hire a contractor in the first place? If there were no problem, they wouldn't pay for that. And when we were negotiating the contract terms, the head of security or whatever he was mentioned paying for ship repairs and combat bonuses. Didn't you hear any of that?"

"...I wasn't really paying attention to that part..."

"A job that asks for an 'escort' almost always means pirates are involved. Which naturally means the police might show up—nothing strange about that."

"'Nothing strange about that,' you say—so casually! That means we might end up in a firefight with actual pirates!"

"Yep."

"That's the police's job!"

She had a point. The interstellar police had originally been established to counter criminal organizations and space pirates who operated across multiple independent star systems. For that reason, they held authority to investigate and intervene in independent systems, and the right to request military mobilization against superior firepower.

Pirate suppression was, properly speaking, their job.

"I know," Kane said blandly. "But pirates don't only appear here, and the interstellar police deal with more than just pirates. They don't have enough ships to assign escorts to every freighter in existence. That's precisely why jobs get passed down to contractors like us."

"But—space pirates! S-p-a-c-e p-i-r-a-t-e-s!"

"Don't worry," Canal interjected with a confident smile. "They're just regular space pirates. No matter how many of them come at us, they won't be a match for me."

"...Well, I suppose that's true..."

Milly relaxed somewhat. After all, the Swordbreaker looked like an ordinary vessel on the outside, but was in fact a genuine Lost Ship—a relic of alien civilization.

When humanity had spread across the galaxy, they had made no contact with any living alien species—but on countless planets, they discovered ruins left behind by extinct extraterrestrials. Among those discoveries, rumors had begun to circulate about Lost Ships: ancient vessels of incomprehensible performance, whose existence was reportedly being suppressed by discoverers and authorities alike.

That was the common wisdom, at least. Most people dismissed it as rumor.

And yet, here was one.

Kane had acquired it from his late grandmother Alice in circumstances that sounded more like a child receiving a toy—"Grandma gave it to me"—and he still didn't know how she had come to possess such a vessel. Canal presumably knew, but any questions were met with nothing but an enigmatic smile.

"Alright. Now that you've calmed down, let's get moving."

Kane rose from his seat. The freighter they were escorting didn't depart for three more days. There was no point just loitering on the orbital port.

The two of them had decided to go down to Regn. Laglude had arranged shuttle tickets and a hotel room.

Canal waved them off with a grin.

"Have a nice trip. Kane, just because I'm not there doesn't mean you can push Milly down, okay?"

"AS IF I WOULD!"

* * *

"Oh wow!"

Stepping out of the shuttle, Milly exclaimed at once.

Celes City—the largest city on Planet Regn. The spaceport was right next to the ocean.

"Hey, look, Kane—the sea! The sea!"

She stayed glued to the windows as they walked toward the lobby, gushing over the blue vista.

"...Yeah, not bad," Kane admitted.

They had no obligations when not actively escorting. A swim sounded perfectly fine. And male instinct being what it was, he found himself picturing Milly in a swimsuit—

"But can you actually swim?" he asked.

"Swim?"

Milly blinked at him. "What are you talking about? When you say 'ocean,' you mean surf fishing, right?"

"...That's... very... niche of you..."

Chatting like this, they cleared customs and stepped into the lobby.

"...Not to be rude, but this place has kind of a rough crowd, doesn't it...?" Milly muttered under her breath.

She was right. Among the businesspeople and tourists, there were more than a few rough-looking individuals who seemed perfectly comfortable claiming the space as their own.

The shuttle itself had been only half full. Laglude was apparently content to comp a seat or two if it helped put them at ease.

"...Those types," Kane said quietly, "are either fellow contractors, plainclothes police—or pirates."

"Pirates wouldn't show up here in plain sight!"

"You'd be surprised. Those kinds of people are completely lacking in blood, tears, brains, and basic human decency, but appetite and other drives? Perfectly intact. They come down to nearby planets all the time to blow off steam. They know the law can't touch them without evidence."

"...Stop being so casual about it..."

"Down here, they'll keep a low profile. The local police and interstellar police have their eyes on this place. Anyone who causes trouble on the ground is basically handing themselves over to be arrested."

They checked into the Laglude-provided hotel near the spaceport—separate rooms—and headed out for dinner.

* * *

The afternoon light slanting off the sea was warm enough to swim in.

Kane—stubbornly wearing his cape despite the heat—and Milly found a seaside restaurant and ordered beers.

The place was mostly empty at this off-hour, though five or six other patrons were already there. Every single one of them was, to borrow Milly's phrase, "clearly rough-looking."

The men whistled at Milly as they entered. The two of them ignored it and sat at a table with a view of the sea.

"—Hey there. First time here?" A man spoke to Milly just as their beers arrived.

He looked around thirty, tall and well-built, with brown hair and decent features. His jeans were rumpled and dirty, and the stubble on his chin was somewhere between "rugged" and "just unkempt."

"Just visiting? Not a bad planet, this one. —How about letting me buy you a drink?"

Milly paused. If she ignored him, he might pick a fight; if she was too friendly, he'd get the wrong idea.

She offered a small smile. "Not right now. Maybe another time."

"...Oh... uh... sure..."

He scratched his head, politely but definitively rebuffed.

Laughter burst from the table in the back. "Told you she'd turn you down, Jes!" "Drinks on you tonight!"

His friends—apparently they'd had a bet going. Stung by the teasing, the man called Jes turned back to Milly and kept pushing.

"Aw come on, don't be like that. Just one beer, that's all I'm asking."

Milly glanced over at Kane, who had been watching the whole exchange with great amusement and making absolutely no effort to help.

But Jes didn't even look at Kane. "...Blow this weirdo off, he's just some joker dressed in a cape..."

Clatter. Kane stood up.

Milly flinched and instinctively pulled back. Kane's face still wore a smile, but his eyes weren't smiling at all.

"...Something to say?"

Jes finally turned to face him properly. Standing close, Jes had perhaps an inch on him.

Kane looked up at him at close range, grinned with unshakeable confidence—

"You know—"

In that moment.

CRACK!

Kane's kick caught Jes cleanly under the jaw.

The secret art: launching an attack mid-sentence. It was an underhanded, devious, but devastatingly effective technique.

THUD. Jes spun halfway around and kissed the floor.

Kane planted one foot on his back.

"I'm the type who leads with hands and feet, not words! Got it!?"

"He's IMPULSIVE!" Milly clapped her hands to her head in despair.

* * *

At the point where the hostile mood arose between Kane and Jes, Milly had planned to pretend to be frightened, grab Kane by the arm, and drag him out of the shop—but she had never imagined Kane would instantly kick the man to the ground and stand triumphant over him.

"YOU! That hurt!"

Jes's friends surged forward from their seats in the back.

"Come at me!"

"Oh, we will!"

The answering voice came from directly beneath Kane's boot—Jes was already getting back up.

"Tough, aren't you! I like it!"

And so the brawl began.

* * *

The afternoon sun slanted low over the sea, making the water shimmer and sway. Seabirds played in the sail of a distant yacht. Beer foam rose and popped in a condensation-beaded glass. Milly tilted the golden lager toward her lips and let its pleasantly bitter taste spread across her tongue.

"—The ocean really is lovely."

She murmured to no one in particular. Behind the counter, the old proprietor polished glasses in silence.

While Milly indulged in complete escapism, the brawl showed no sign of ending.

"Take this! And THIS!"

"How d'you like THAT! And THAT!"

All sides had long since abandoned technique or tactics. It had become a proper children's brawl—no enemies, no allies, no skill involved.

But the fun didn't last forever.

"What are you people doing!?"

The sudden voice made everyone freeze.

Three men stood in the doorway. The lead figure wore plain clothes, but the other two were in uniform—unmistakably police officers.

A passerby had reported the commotion.

"—Kane!?"

The plainclothes officer's involuntary exclamation made his uniformed colleagues stop in their tracks.

"...You know them... Inspector Rail?"

"...Well... more or less..."

Rail Freamer—with his flowing black hair and pretty features, he could have passed for a model. But behind that face was a young and capable inspector of the interstellar police. He and Kane had crossed paths on a number of previous incidents. What you might call a classic "persistent bad luck connection."

"...R-Rail... what are you doing here...?"

"That's what I should be asking."

Rail stared at Kane with a flat expression, then sighed.

"...You start brawls everywhere you go, Kane. Is it a hobby?"

"It's not a hobby! And why is the interstellar police always showing up to break up fights!?"

At the mention of the interstellar police, Jes and his companions shifted uncomfortably.

But Rail didn't look at them. He said to Kane: "Just happened to be nearby. Couldn't exactly ignore it. —More importantly. What is this all about?"

Jes and company tensed. If Kane had friends in the police, it would be easy for him to pin the blame on them.

But Kane just shrugged.

"Ah, just horsing around with some acquaintances. Maybe got a little carried away... but no one's seriously hurt, and I'll pay for anything that got broken."

Rail was quiet for a moment, then let his gaze drift to the proprietor behind the counter, who was still polishing glasses at his own steady pace.

"—Alright," Rail said, reading the silence as consent. "I'll leave the rest to you, Kane. No lasting problems."

"Rail!"

Rail had already turned to go, but he paused.

"...About Clave... I'm sorry."

At the name, Rail was briefly still. It took him a moment to recall who 'Clave' was—a stranger he'd used as nothing more than a tool.

"—Forget it. It wasn't your fault."

He walked out, his two officers exchanging puzzled looks as they followed.

Quiet returned to the bar.

* * *

The next day, nursing a headache from too much celebratory drinking the previous night with Jes and his crew, Kane sat in a modest restaurant with Milly, who had spent the morning fishing on the rocks.

The meeting with Rail at the bar had led to introductions. Jes, it turned out, was a fellow trouble contractor hired by Laglude—on an assignment departing that very day.

"—So. What are you up to here, Rail?" Kane asked, once they'd settled in. "You're here on a pirate investigation, right?"

"—Yes," Rail admitted, since there was no point in hiding it.

"I can't go into investigative details, but pirates have been active in this area for about half a standard year now. The interstellar police showed up... but honestly, at first we weren't taking it very seriously. These are just pirates, we thought—they'll move on if we patrol for a while."

"But they didn't."

"Correct. For whatever reason, they stayed put and kept targeting Laglude's freighters. Laglude wasn't suffering massive losses, but the constant attacks were damaging their reputation. So when they started hiring trouble contractors, the pirates got more persistent and aggressive. At that point, we had no choice but to get serious—and so I was sent in as reinforcement."

Kane looked at him shrewdly. "So you got outwitted a few times?"

Rail's expression flickered. He looked away.

"No comment."

As good as a yes. In fact, the interstellar police had been run around in circles multiple times.

"So you've been trying to approach them through their known presence here on the planet—asking questions around town. They didn't like that, and set that bomb," Kane said.

"Don't remind me."

"—Heads up," Kane said quietly. "Two people came in just after you. Tall guy in a jeans jacket and a stocky one with a beard. Their eyes are on you."

Rail froze, then casually scanned the bar's reflection in the window.

Kane added, "They just stood up."

The two men left money on their table and moved toward the exit. A waitress followed them.

She was carrying a black bag in one hand.

"Sir? You forgot your bag!"

In that instant—

Kane and Rail both reached the same horrible conclusion simultaneously.

"Don't—" Rail called out.

"THROW IT AWAY—"

The waitress had just stepped through the doorway when she turned back at Rail's shout.

BOOM!

The explosion shook the whole building.

"—Ugh..."

"Ow, ow, ow..."

Kane and Rail groaned softly as they pulled themselves upright. They'd apparently blacked out for a moment. The explosion had technically happened outside, and they'd hit the floor in time, so they'd escaped serious damage—but their ears were ringing and their bodies ached from being thrown around.

And Kane's beloved cape had caught on something and was now hanging in torn shreds.

"—Milly!?"

Kane looked around wildly and spotted her crawling out from under an overturned table. In the instant of the explosion, Kane had pushed her head down.

"...W-what was that!?"

All the windows had shattered, the entrance was a gaping hole, chairs and tables were knocked over everywhere, and broken glass and blood were scattered across the floor.

Rail stood in stunned silence.

"I didn't expect them to come at us this directly..."

"Those bastards—"

Kane spun around.

"Stop! Kane! They're long gone by now!"

If his ears were still ringing, he didn't show it—or didn't care. He was already moving.

"I'm going too!"

Milly ran after him. Rail cursed and followed.

They couldn't find the two men. But a taxi was nearby, and a wild chase through darkening streets eventually brought them to the run-down 52nd Street district, where the pirates were said to congregate.

Milly spotted a familiar silhouette near a parked car—the tall man in the jeans jacket. A chase on foot followed. More of the pirates' associates tried to block the way, but Milly took them down with her paralysis gun.

Two of the original suspects eventually got away, but the others were subdued.

Rail took a bullet graze to the shoulder in the fight.

* * *

The next evening, with the sun setting orange over the sea, Milly sat in the spaceport lobby waiting for the shuttle back up to the orbital port. She felt a quiet melancholy she couldn't quite explain.

Rail had handled all the police questioning on their behalf. She hadn't heard from him since.

Kane was at the check-in counter. Milly stared out the window at the runway dyed red in the fading light.

"—Kane?"

A voice spoke from the side. Kane turned.

A man in his fifties stood there—impeccably dressed, white-haired except for one stray streak of brown. A flawlessly put-together businessman.

"Maligan Howell. Head of Security for the Cargo Division."

The man who had appeared on screen when Kane negotiated the contract.

"Kane Blueriver," Kane replied, shaking his offered hand.

"I heard you got caught up in quite a mess yesterday."

"Yes..." Kane glanced around for Milly, but she seemed to have vanished. When he looked back, he happened to catch the eye of a young woman across the lobby—someone he didn't recognize, watching him with something close to hostility. She looked away immediately.

"Ah, I have an assistant... she must have stepped away. Probably in the restroom."

"I see. The incident yesterday—pirates, do you think?"

"Most likely... though there won't be any proof."

Maligan exhaled heavily. "The police need to do their job. We can't work in peace with those pirates running loose." A pause. "You're on the escort for tomorrow's departure, yes?"

"Yes, departing before noon."

"Good. Be careful out there." And with that, he turned and walked away, his footsteps ringing across the lobby.

"Who was that?"

Kane spun around with a start. Milly was right behind him, a large bag of chocolates in her hands.

"Where did you go!?"

"The gift shop. Their chocolate is amazing."

"...Is all of that chocolate?"

"Yep. —So, who was that?"

"Laglude's security chief, Maligan. The guy who was on screen when we negotiated the contract. He came to gather information."

"About the pirates?"

"Yeah. He's anxious about their movements."

"Well," Milly said, popping a chocolate into her mouth, "we've at least got those thugs in custody. That's a start."

Kane sighed deeply.

"Those people we caught have no proven connection to the bombers—or the pirates. If they say 'we were just trying to mug you,' that's their story and that's the end of it."

"...So... it's all a dead end?"

"Not necessarily."

Kane smiled cheerfully. "The ones who got away last night have probably put our names and faces in the pirates' black book by now."

"...Wait..."

"Once this escort job is done and we come back to Regn, if we wander around some sketchy bar or two, they'll probably come to us looking for revenge."

"...That means we're BAIT!"

Kane blinked mildly. "...Did you somehow not realize you were putting yourself in danger during that chase last night...?"

"I... that's... different!"

"—Anyway. Future problems are future problems. For now, back to space we go."

Kane started walking toward the shuttle gate, Milly trailing behind with a stream of grumbling. But for all he'd said to her—Kane had no real intention of getting deeply involved with the pirates. Not yet.

Space Pirates

...Ohhh... ohhhhh...

That sound always filled the room.

Two figures stood in the shadow-drenched chamber. An old man with silver hair sat in absolute silence, listening to the report of the man in the dark suit.

Albert Van Stargazer.

His public face: chairman of the enormous Gazer Conglomerate. His other face: supreme leader of the galaxy-spanning criminal syndicate known as Nightmare.

"—Finally, the situation in Sector 4-3-B..."

The man in the dark suit stood in the corner of the room, reading aloud from the report in his hands. He nominally held the number-two position in Nightmare, but in practice he functioned as Stargazer's secretary.

Yet he felt no resentment toward that role. He had entered this world as a teenager, armed with talent, confidence, and ambition—ambition to one day climb to the top and rule Nightmare in Stargazer's place.

He had privately laughed at the subordinates who called Albert a monster.

But the day he was first granted an audience with Stargazer—his thinking changed completely.

The rumors had been wrong. Albert Van Stargazer was not a monster. He was something that couldn't be summarized by such a common metaphor.

It was not his rank or title that had inspired fear—it was Stargazer's very existence. His soul had trembled at the man himself.

The reason was something he still couldn't explain.

And that trembling had never gone away, not in all the years he'd served as Stargazer's right hand.

Perspiring faintly, he continued his report.

"—As previously reported, the space pirates that have invaded the Winaran Sector—Nightmare's territory—have suffered significant losses against our suppression fleet. In fact, the fleet itself was nearly destroyed."

He paused for a moment. Still no reaction from Stargazer.

"According to survivors, there was a single unknown vessel among the pirates with extraordinary combat capability."

"—Oh?"

At that, Stargazer opened his eyes. The pressure of being fixed by those violet-tinged black irises multiplied several times over.

"...There is footage as well, but a photograph may suffice..."

"A photograph will do. Show me."

The man in the dark suit stepped forward and handed over a single photograph.

"—Oh..."

Stargazer studied the photograph and murmured again, with what sounded like curiosity.

The man returned to his spot and continued. "—And regarding this matter, trouble contractor Kane Blueriver appears to be involved."

"—That man!?"

The hostility in Stargazer's voice made the man in the dark suit flinch despite himself. He had simply reported the name because Stargazer had once shown interest in it, and had not anticipated this intensity of reaction.

Curiosity flickered in him, but he knew well that idle curiosity in this world could easily become fatal.

"—That concludes today's report."

"Understood. You may leave."

With a slight bow, the man in the dark suit departed.

What remained in the room was Stargazer—and the darkness.

"Did you hear that?" Stargazer asked, holding the photograph of the unknown ship, speaking to the darkness.

"—I did, of course," the darkness answered. In a voice that seemed to vibrate from the room itself.

"—A Lost Ship. Like you—'Spreader of Darkness.'"

"A Lost Ship, yes. But do not misunderstand, Albert. That is merely another Lost Ship. It does not have power equal to mine. Not the power to bring destruction..."

"You're special, then?"

"...That is correct. A vessel like that cannot destroy me. But it could wound me."

"...An eyesore..."

"And even more of an eyesore is—"

"Vorfeed—the only being with the power to destroy you," Stargazer finished. "Can you do it? 'Spreader of Darkness?'"

There was a pause before the answer came.

"I will destroy it," the darkness said, filled with anger and hatred.

* * *

"WHY!?"

Staring at the gratin dish before him, Kane could only gape in bewilderment.

It was the evening of the day they'd departed from Regn's orbital port, escorting the Laglude freighter Summer Rabbit. ("Evening" in this context being purely a matter of the clock.)

Milly had made homemade gratin for dinner. One spoonful in, and Kane was overcome with a profound sense of cosmic injustice.

"How does a gratin that burned a hole through the frying pan taste this GOOD!?"

It was true. Despite causing regular catastrophes with cookware, Milly's cooking was extraordinary. The pizza made from the self-destructed pressure cooker, the hamburger steak that had melted the measuring cup—all of it rivaled or surpassed any average restaurant.

The only problem was that some piece of kitchen equipment met its end every time she cooked.

"Thanks for saying that," Milly said pleasantly, stirring her own bowl.

"...I didn't mean it as a compliment..."

"Oh, don't be embarrassed!"

Kane decided further argument was useless and focused on eating.

"Mmm, smells amazing~!"

Just as Milly lifted her spoon—

"Kane! Milly! Get to the cockpit!"

Canal's voice rang through the ship from nowhere in particular.

"Ehhhh?" Milly stared at her bowl with very obvious displeasure.

"What's wrong!?"

"An unidentified ship is approaching. It might be..."

"Pirates!?"

Kane was already on his feet and heading for the cockpit. Milly had no choice but to follow—gratin in hand.

"—What's wrong with you, bringing your bowl here?!"

"The whole point of gratin is that it's best when it's hot."

"...I know, but that's not—"

"If it IS an enemy, we've got time before the battle starts. I'll finish eating by then."

"...Sure, fine..."

Canal reported that the vessel was approaching from the side. No weapons had been apparent yet, but the ship had not responded to Canal's greeting transmission either.

This deep in pirate-troubled space, an unidentified ship that wouldn't even exchange courtesy signals was about as suspicious as they came.

"Get ready—psy barrier deployment prep, beam cannon energy circuit open."

"Understood. —Incoming transmission from Summer Rabbit."

Kane groaned softly. "—Put it through."

The main display switched to a heavyset, grumpy-looking middle-aged face.

"This is Summer Rabbit! What is that ship!? Is it a pirate!?"

...Predictable...

"Don't worry. If it is a pirate, they'll come after us first. We'll take care of them."

"B-but—"

"Relax," Canal cut in with her most reassuring smile. "We're professionals, after all. Leave it to us. —We have some preparations to make, if you'll excuse us."

The captain reluctantly cut the channel.

"All right. Canal, keep monitoring that ship."

"—SOS signal, Kane. From the control room."

"...Thought so."

"Trap," Milly declared with complete certainty, setting down her empty gratin bowl.

"Probably. But whether or not it's a trap, we can't just ignore an SOS," Kane said. "The enemy knows that."

"What are we doing?"

"Get psy barrier and lateral thrusters ready. Milly, standby on the beam cannon. Watch them—and wait for their move."

A tense silence settled over the cockpit.

And then the ship revealed itself—its hull plating split open, and a massive cannon barrel swung into view.

"Kane! They're accelerating! Communications jamming deployed!"

"Canal, thruster burst—ram them! Cut thrusters before they open fire! psy barrier deploy!"

The Swordbreaker's attitude thrusters flared, driving the ship straight at the enemy vessel. At the moment the pirate's cannon finished deploying—the Swordbreaker cut thrust and deployed its barrier.

The cannon fired.

CRASH!

Violent vibration and noise hammered the Swordbreaker's hull—but the psy barrier deflected every shot.

The distance between the ships shrank rapidly. At this rate they would collide head-on. Even the pirates seemed to realize the Swordbreaker wasn't going to flinch, and they began maneuvering away while continuing to fire.

"Canal! Vent barrier energy as propulsion—push into them!"

"Understood!"

The pirates evaded but the Swordbreaker pressed them harder—then, abruptly, the pirate ship's engines blazed at full power and it turned to flee.

"They're running!?"

"Canal! On my signal, vent barrier energy in a directional burst—get us clear of their firing line, then drop the barrier! After that I'll handle evasive maneuvers! Milly—open fire on the enemy ship when the barrier drops, but don't destroy them! Disable and capture!"

"Understood!" both answered perfectly in unison.

"GO!"

The Swordbreaker slid sideways in an instant. Milly's shot connected—striking one of the pirate ship's four engines and putting it out of commission without destroying the ship.

"Nice shot, Milly!"

But before Kane could follow up with a surrender demand—the crippled pirate ship turned its surviving guns on the Summer Rabbit.

"SUMMER RABBIT!?"

The pirates' shot tore away a section of the freighter's outer hull.

"I'm blowing them away!" Milly moved to fire.

"Don't!" Kane said.

"They want to negotiate. If we attack them, they blow up our client's ship. If they blow up our client's ship, we've failed the job. Hold position—Canal, put the Swordbreaker between them as a shield. Barrier up."

He ground his teeth, but gave the order.

Keeping up scattered harassing fire, the pirate ship fired its remaining engines and slowly retreated.

"Communications jamming cleared," Canal reported. A considerable distance had opened between them.

"Incoming from Summer Rabbit."

"...Put them through."

The grumpy captain reappeared, and without a word of thanks, immediately demanded to know why Kane hadn't destroyed the pirates.

Before Kane could respond—

"Understood," Canal said pleasantly. "I'm logging your request as an official order change. If our pursuit of the pirate vessel leaves the Summer Rabbit unguarded and you are attacked by a secondary force, all liability rests with your vessel."

"Wait—WHAT!? There's a secondary force!?"

"It's not impossible." Canal began warming up the Swordbreaker's engines as she spoke, entirely without blinking.

"If that happens—good luck. We're beginning pursuit now."

"W-WAIT! I TAKE IT BACK! PLEASE DON'T LEAVE!"

The captain was nearly in tears—begging like a man watching his wife walk out the door—when Canal finally relented.

"...I appreciate the clarification. —Now, shall we proceed under the original terms?"

"YES! YES! PLEASE! I'M SORRY! STAY!"

"Excellent. We'll report this incident to the interstellar police. And please try to keep unnecessary transmissions to a minimum. Good day."

She cut the channel with the same composed smile she'd worn throughout.

"THAT WAS GREAT!" Kane and Milly erupted in simultaneous applause.

Canal smiled modestly. "—Oh, I almost decided to just blow up his ship. But I managed to hold back."

Kane laughed dryly. He wasn't entirely sure she was joking.

* * *

Ten days later. Night. Kane and Milly stepped back onto Planet Regn.

The escort had been completed without further incident. As expected, when the interstellar police arrived in response to their report, the pirate ship had long since vanished.

Tonight, Kane had brought his Psi-Blade—a weapon that used psychic energy extracted by a headband and amplified by a booster unit, then emitted as a blade or projectile from a resonator. Archaic and temperamental compared to modern weapons, but Kane had an irrational fondness for it.

He'd also thought carefully about the risks of returning to Regn. Their faces were known to some of the pirates now. But getting deep into a fight with them had never been his intention. That was still true. Probably.

Milly still had her paralysis gun. They checked back into the same hotel, and headed out to dinner.

After wandering indecisively for a while—refusing several restaurants on grounds of dress code (Kane's cape again) or suspected pirate clientele (Milly's anxiety)—they ended up at the seaside bar where the brawl with Jes had started.

The place was busy.

"—KANE! Hey, Kane!"

A familiar face called from across the room. One of Jes's companions from the fight—a stocky man with a black beard and sunglasses.

"—That seat open?"

Without waiting for an answer, he sat down across from Kane. His expression beneath the beard and sunglasses carried a shadow Kane noticed immediately.

He drank in silence for a moment.

"—What happened?" Kane finally asked.

The man—Madison, if Kane remembered right—took another drink and spoke flatly.

"—Jes is gone."

"...What...?"

"Pirates got him... when the police showed up, it was too late. Just wreckage—his ship and the freighter both."

"I never heard a word about this!"

"Laglude probably didn't say anything."

Madison exhaled tiredly. His eyes, behind those glasses, were focused somewhere else entirely.

He'd heard about it four or five days ago, returning from a job—through rumors and old newspapers. The freighter hadn't arrived at its destination. Laglude contacted it and got no reply, then called in the police. Wreckage found. Jes and his ship were gone.

"Laglude didn't even have mandatory check-in calls!" Kane snapped.

"Yeah, someone made noise about that. I read an interview with their security chief—Maligan. He said even if there had been check-in procedures, would that have prevented the tragedy? The real problem is the pirates. Technically correct, but it still makes you sick."

Madison drained his glass. "...Jes. Damn fool. Getting taken out by regular pirates with a ship like his and skills like his... dying so easily like that..."

The last words came out a little wet.

Kane and Milly ate their dinner in silence, the usual noise of the bar grating on their nerves.

* * *

Two hours later, stepping out into the night air, Kane and Milly found the weight of the evening heavy on them both.

"—Let's get a drink somewhere. Shake this mood," Kane said eventually.

Milly hesitated a moment, then agreed. They crossed the street toward a bar called Ricard with a blue neon sign.

Inside, trouble greeted them before they'd even closed the door.

A young woman with chestnut hair and black eyes—perhaps nineteen or twenty—was being crowded by three rough-looking men.

Kane recognized her immediately.

The woman from the spaceport—the one who had watched him with that strange, hostile gaze.

"None of your business!" she was telling the men. "Talk to me like that again and you'll regret it!"

One of the men raised his fist—

Before it fell, Kane had already knocked the man flat.

The other two stared. "...Y-you just knock down a guy without knowing anything!?"

"When a man and woman are having an argument, the man is usually the bad guy. That's just how it goes. Also your outfits are not helping your case."

"YOU—"

Kane's fist caught the second man's chin before he could finish his sentence.

The third man looked at him, looked at the two on the floor, looked at Kane again.

"...Alright..." He slowly raised his hands and woke up his two companions. They left, quietly—though one paused at the door to deliver the traditional parting shot.

Kane spoke it out loud before the man could: "'I'll remember this.'"

The man left in silence, looking profoundly inconvenienced.

Kane turned to the young woman. She was still watching him with a mix of anger and suspicion.

"Can you tell me what's going on?"

"None of your business," she said.

"I suppose not. But you're clearly angry at me for some reason we haven't established yet."

"I know what you are," she snapped. "You wag your tail for a company of murderers! I have nothing to say to someone like you!"

She turned on her heel and walked out.

"...What was that about?" Milly murmured.

Kane stared after her. "No idea."

"—She wasn't always like this, you know."

The voice came from close by—a shabby middle-aged man at the counter, watching them with a knowing look.

"Her name's Merina. She changed after pirates killed her boyfriend. He was a crewman on a Laglude ship." He tilted his empty glass significantly. Kane ordered him a brandy—and had to upgrade to a better label at the man's insistence.

"She blames Laglude for his death. The ship he was on had no escort. She's been going around telling anyone who'll listen that Laglude is a company of murderers."

"...Where did she used to work?" Kane asked.

"Here. This bar."

Kane stared. "...You mean I paid for expensive brandy to get information I could have gotten free from the bartender?"

"Probably more detailed information from the bartender, actually."

The bartender confirmed this with a barely-suppressed smile.

Kane put his head down and asked for a glass of water.

* * *

The next day, Kane and Milly visited the local police station and found Rail sitting alone in the pirate investigation room, surrounded by files.

"Good afternoon, Rail," Kane said. Rail glanced up, unenthusiastic.

"I'm busy. If you're here to fight, leave."

"Not here for that. The people we caught in the alley—what happened to them?"

"I'm busy," Rail repeated.

Kane gave Milly a look.

She smiled and leaned over slightly. "Hey, Rail, could you maybe tell us about the pirates? I'd really love to know..."

Rail made a small strangled sound, visibly struggling with himself for a moment, then gestured for them to sit.

"...Miss Milly, you'd like to know about the people we apprehended?" he began, pointedly not looking at Kane. "They're insisting they were planning to mug us. Not connected to the bomb, not connected to the pirates—that's their story. We can't disprove it."

"And the pirates themselves?"

"Not much progress, honestly. The main problem is budget and the sheer size of space. We can't patrol everywhere. When a distress call comes in, we might be hours away. Against pirate ships that have been tuned up with stolen money, our patrol vessels can barely keep up."

"Could you escort all the freighters at least until they reach safe space?"

"Theoretically—but then we'd have no ships left to protect passenger liners. And pirates prefer passenger ships, since they can take hostages."

"...So your focus is passenger ships."

"Right. We're trying to cover both, but it's stretched thin."

Rail pulled out some photographs—surveillance shots of a red-haired man in his early thirties, sharp-featured, rough-looking but clearly not ordinary.

"Alzas Cornwell. Possibly not his real name. Showed up here around the same time the pirates did. Rumored to have come from some organization. He's clearly running the pirates—everyone on the planet seems to know it—but we have no hard evidence against him."

"He's at 52nd Street?"

"Yes. But that neighborhood, even local police don't want to go near it."

Kane paused. "...By the way, Rail—among the pirate attacks on Laglude freighters, was there a crewman named Assort?"

"...Why?"

"Just a hunch. Can you check if anything was unusual about how he died?"

Rail flipped through a file. "...Assort Ingress... twenty-five years old, navigation officer. Killed when pirates destroyed the freighter Rushing Fox, two months ago. But Miss Milly—pirates sank the entire ship. There's nothing suspicious about how he died."

Kane and Milly exchanged a quiet look.

That was technically true. And yet—Merina's words continued to trouble them both.

Merina

The murmur of voices. The smell of tobacco smoke and alcohol.

She'd been to plenty of planets, but the particular atmosphere of a bar never changed, wherever you went.

Milly found the face she'd been looking for at the counter and sat down in the adjacent seat.

"Hi there."

At the greeting, Merina turned to look at her.

"—Have we met?"

"Oh, somewhere around," Milly said vaguely.

As she'd expected—Merina didn't remember her. Back when the two had briefly shared the bar, Milly had been pretending to be a stranger while Kane started his brawl. Merina had apparently paid no attention to her.

Milly ordered two cocktails and slid one across to Merina.

"...What's this about?"

Milly lowered her voice. "...I want to ask you about Laglude."

She let the implication hang in the air.

Merina's words from the night before had been bothering both of them too much to leave alone. Kane—who Merina had taken an immediate dislike to—had stayed in the rental car while Milly took on the conversation.

"—What do you mean?"

Suspicion sharpened in Merina's eyes. Milly smiled lightly.

"I'm a journalist. Chasing a scoop. No business card, sorry."

"...You don't look like one."

"If I looked like a journalist, I couldn't chase scoops."

Merina gave a reluctant half-smile at that.

"—More importantly. I've been hearing interesting things about Laglude from a certain source. Looks like they've been up to something."

Merina's expression shifted slightly. Her gaze became probing.

"—Something, like?"

"Like..." Milly kept her eyes fixed on Merina's and spoke very quietly. "...Something like... murder."

Merina's color changed completely. "H-how much do you know!?"

"Keep your voice down."

Milly held up a hand, looking a little embarrassed.

"To be honest—I don't know that much yet. It's still at the rumor stage."

"—If it's just rumors—"

Merina looked down at her drink.

"—What about the rumor that Laglude's security chief Maligan has been meeting with the pirate boss?"

Milly went completely still for a fraction of a second.

...Oh no. Have I stepped somewhere I really shouldn't have?

She forced herself to stay calm.

"—That depends on your source."

"The ex-girlfriend of one of Laglude's navigation officers personally saw the two of them together. Near 52nd Street. She was visiting a friend's apartment and saw Maligan and someone get into a limousine together."

"...That's worth following up on."

"That's your job," Merina said.

"—Fair enough."

Milly stood and picked up her cocktail without drinking it.

"Thank you. That was helpful. —And by the way, I'd recommend not telling anyone else about this."

She left with a smile.

With an outwardly relaxed walk, she headed toward the parking lot nearby.

"Well?"

Kane was waiting in the rental car.

Milly opened the passenger door, slid in—

Slammed it shut.

"I JUST HEARD SOMETHING INCREDIBLY SCARY!"

"Don't scream in my ear!"

"Forget that! Listen to THIS, Kane—apparently Laglude and the pirates are WORKING TOGETHER!"

"WHAT!?"

"Don't shout so loud either!"

"You told me to be surprised!"

"That was a figure of speech!"

"Forget figures of speech—is this true, Milly!?"

"At least—Merina absolutely believes it. She says she personally saw the security chief Maligan getting into a car with someone near 52nd Street, where the pirate boss operates. Could be mistaken identity or misunderstanding—but it warrants checking."

"...Makes sense." Kane was quiet, thinking.

"If it's true, the pirates would benefit obviously—getting routes and security schedules from Maligan would let them avoid patrols. But what does Maligan get out of it?"

"Could be anything. Blackmail. Bribery. Money."

Milly produced chocolate from nowhere and bit into a piece.

"...So first, we look into Maligan's background."

Kane activated the communicator built into his watch—a direct link to Canal aboard the Swordbreaker.

"Canal. Look up everything you can on Maligan Howell—Laglude's security chief, the man on screen when we negotiated the contract."

"Understood. I'll contact you when I have something. —And also..."

"What is it?"

A brief hesitation from Canal.

"...I can't confirm it, but something's been bothering me ever since we got back from the escort job. I think one might be nearby."

"One? One what?"

"...The same type of existence as me. Like the Galveila we fought before."

"Don't tell me—Nightmare has moved!?"

"...I can't say for certain. But probably."

"Understood. Let me know if anything changes."

Kane looked out the car window at the rain-drenched 52nd Street.

"—Nightmare again..."

He said it quietly, almost to himself.

* * *

Merina left the bar only moments after Milly did.

The journalist woman's parting words—"don't tell anyone"—had cast a shadow over her thoughts.

Until now, she'd been rushing around driven purely by the need to avenge her boyfriend, without thinking clearly. Only now did she begin to grasp how much danger she was actually in.

Earlier today—rashly—she had called Maligan Howell on the phone. Voice only. She'd said nothing but: "You seem to be quite close with the pirate boss. I saw you. Near 52nd Street." Then she'd hung up.

She'd used a pay phone and not given her name. But what if somehow they'd identified her—?

Maligan and the pirates were people who could casually arrange for an employee to be killed. Would they hesitate to 'take care of' her?

Fear expanded inside her. They knew it was a woman. They might have a recording.

And she'd been going around town telling people that Laglude were murderers. Finding her wouldn't be that difficult.

And that journalist—had she really been a friend? Or had Laglude gotten wind of Merina and sent someone to draw her out?

The woman hadn't even told Merina her name.

Doubt fed fear, and fear fed paranoia, and without quite realizing it, Merina was half-running toward the parking lot where she'd left her car.

At the entrance, she stopped dead.

There in the parking lot—in a car near the back—sat two people.

One was the journalist woman who'd just been talking to her.

The other was the man she'd seen at the spaceport—the one who'd been talking warmly with Maligan.

The two of them were talking quietly together in the car.

—They're working together. I knew it.

Terror flooded through Merina's entire body.

She backed away from the lot entrance without a sound and fled down the street.

They'd identified her now. She'd be next.

She couldn't go to the car—those two were there. She was too panicked to even think of flagging a taxi. Her legs carried her on automatic toward her apartment.

Everyone on the street looked like an enemy. The man standing at the corner—was he waiting for her? The woman walking behind her—was she following? Milly had already cast Merina a suspicious glance that made her freeze at the first intersection.

It was all in her head, but Merina didn't know that. She weaved through the streets, doubling back on herself, ducking into alleys—and eventually found herself lost in a deserted back lane.

—Where am I...?

She looked around nervously.

"—Hey there, little lady. Taking a walk alone at this hour?"

She spun to find four rough-looking men behind her.

They were probably just ordinary street thugs—but to Merina's terrified eyes, they were assassins sent by Laglude and the pirates.

"—You're space pirates!" she blurted.

The men exchanged glances, then one of them played along with a grin. "Sure we are. How'd you guess?"

"—Well then."

A low voice came from behind Merina.

"Pirates. How convenient."

The voice drew closer. She turned.

A man approached slowly. Golden hair that stood up like a flame. Lean build, with the sharp features of a hawk. Quite handsome—but in his violet-tinged eyes lay an unreadable, alien light.

His clothing was entirely black—a loose, movement-friendly outfit.

He walked forward and stopped between Merina and the thugs.

"—So you're pirates," he said.

"What's it to ya—"

Before the nearest man's hand could reach inside his jacket—

FLASH.

The man fell backward slowly. In the center of his forehead was a small, dark hole.

The man's hand held a metal cylinder—a Psi-Blade resonator. But he wore no headband, no booster unit. In theory, it was impossible to fire a Psi-Blade that way without them. But theory didn't seem to apply here.

The remaining thugs stood frozen.

"I have questions," the man said, indifferent to their horror. "If you're pirates, you'll know. Where is Alzas Cornwell?"

"...We don't know..."

"I see."

A flash. Another dark hole appeared in a man's forehead.

"Then tell me the location of the pirate base."

"Wait—WAIT! We're not actually pirates!" one of the remaining men cried.

"Understood."

The Psi-Blade fired again.

* * *

The rain had turned the streets outside into a curtain of grey.

"—So what do we do now?"

Milly was eating chocolate in the passenger seat when she asked. Kane stared out the rain-streaked window at 52nd Street.

They'd come here on instinct—they couldn't leave Merina alone. But they had no leads and no plan. They'd circled the block once and found nothing.

Gunshots rang faintly through the rain.

"—Gunshots!?"

Milly's exclamation coincided with Kane throwing open the car door and sprinting into the rain. She followed, keeping her umbrella up.

The shots continued intermittently. An abandoned factory on the edge of the block.

Kane had already contacted Canal via his watch-communicator and asked her to call the police. They entered through an open door on the side.

Inside: rows of silent, long-dead machinery. Faint light from small windows.

"Should we call the police directly?"

"Canal's already on it."

They crept forward. A distant crash—one of the fleeing vehicles hitting the factory wall.

Then—gunshots, much closer now. A flash of sparks near Kane's head.

"WHO ARE YOU!? I'M NOT WITH WHOEVER YOU'RE CHASING!"

"Like I believe that! Dressed like that, wandering in here—you're with him, aren't you!?"

...Completely unrelated to what we came for, Milly thought.

Kane broke into a run, leaving Milly behind.

Three gunmen emerged from behind the machinery and opened fire. Kane dodged, took the stairs up to the overhead walkway, and used his Psi-Blade to cut the supports—bringing the whole section crashing down on the gunmen.

He landed on top of the wreckage.

Below, all three men were buried under twisted metal, groaning but alive.

"—Milly?"

She was already standing. She took two steps toward him—then stopped cold, both hands rising slowly.

The barrel of a gun had appeared from behind the machinery beside her, aimed directly at her chest.

"—Don't move. You either."

The man stepped into view. A bearded face. Kane recognized him instantly—he was the other half of the pair who'd planted the bomb at the restaurant.

"Well, well. You were with that police lackey, weren't you? No connection to that other guy after all, I see. Doesn't matter—you're still our enemy. Drop your weapon."

Kane's jaw tightened.

Milly could have tried to shoot the man with her hidden paralysis gun—but at this range, even a twitch of his trigger finger could put a bullet through her. And if Kane dropped his weapon, they'd both be killed.

"Don't," Milly said firmly. "Kane—don't drop it. If you do, we're both dead."

"SHUT UP!"

The gunman shoved her from behind with the barrel.

"You son of a...win this. I won't be in the way," Milly said, almost gently. A strange resolve had settled in her voice.

She closed her eyes. For just a moment, a slight tension crossed her cheek.

"—Ngh!"

A small groan. A thin trail of red-brown ran from the corner of her mouth.

"MILLY!"

Shock flooded Kane's face.

The gunman's grip went slack around Milly as her entire body went limp.

* * *

The gunman panicked, turning from Kane to Milly.

"—WHAT!? She bit her own tongue!?"

He shoved her aside and brought his gun back up toward Kane.

But—

Before the barrel could find its target, Kane's Psi-Blade fired.

The white light punched through the bearded man's forehead.

He fell without pulling the trigger.

Kane didn't move. His eyes weren't on the gunman.

They were on Milly, crumpled on the floor.

"...M-Milly..."

"Hiii~!"

Kane went rigid.

Milly popped to her feet and started brushing dust off her clothes.

"Ugh, I'm dirtier than I expected. I figured there'd be dust, but oil too? I wonder if it'll wash out..."

"...M-Milly..."

"What?"

"...Your tongue... is it okay...?"

"My tongue is perfectly fine. I didn't bite it."

"...But... the blood..."

"Chocolate."

She pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the corner of her mouth. Sure enough—chocolate.

In better light, maybe it would have been obvious. But in the dark, in that situation, nobody would have thought 'chocolate' first.

"...You..."

Kane sank slowly toward the floor, overcome with the aftermath of pure dread, forcing himself to stay upright—

BANG.

Another gunshot from somewhere. They exchanged a look.

"Later! Move!"

* * *

Merina had no idea what was happening.

The mysterious man had told her to take her chance and run. But her hands were still tied behind her back. She got to her feet with difficulty and looked around.

Four doors. She chose one and ran for it.

The door burst open.

Standing in it was a man with the eyes of a cornered beast. Red hair.

Alzas Cornwell.

His hand shot out and grabbed her arm. He swung her in front of him and pressed a gun against her back.

"STAY BACK!" he screamed into the darkness behind him. "COME ANY CLOSER AND SHE DIES!"

It was, with bitter irony, almost exactly the same situation Kane and Milly had just been in.

But the crucial difference was—the one pursuing Alzas was not Kane.

A flash of white light cut through the darkness. The man had no intention of killing Alzas outright—the Psi-Blade burned through Alzas's right ear.

But the shock made Alzas reflexively pull the trigger.

BOOM.

Merina felt the violent impact and sound bury itself inside her body. Alzas released her. She sank to the floor.

Heat welled endlessly from deep in her throat.

Only now did Merina understand. She had chosen the wrong door.

"STAY BACK—" Alzas shrieked, scrambling to take aim again—but white light punched through both his shoulders and both his thighs.

He collapsed, helpless.

The man stepped out of the shadows.

"Talk."

He stood over Alzas, Psi-Blade resonator aimed at his head.

"—Alright! I'll tell you! Just let me live! I promise!"

The man said nothing. Alzas took that as agreement.

"It's the sixth planet of the Vimes system! The next star system over! That's the base!"

The moment the words left his mouth—

The Psi-Blade fired.

The man dragged Alzas's body forward and dropped it in front of Merina's eyes.

"Can you see this. As I said—Alzas Cornwell's body."

He spoke with complete, procedural detachment.

Merina's lips moved slightly—

And then went still.

Whatever she had been trying to say—the man found it entirely irrelevant.

"—You heard that? 'Nezard.'"

He addressed the darkness beyond the door.

"I heard. Clearly."

A voice answered—only inside the man's head. What was in the darkness was merely a medium.

"Then go and spread destruction. I'll find my own way back."

"Understood."

A single word, and the voice went silent.

The man turned to leave—

BANG.

A door was kicked open. A figure appeared.

Kane.

Nezard

When Kane kicked open the door, that man was the first thing he saw.

In that instant—

Kane knew. Half by instinct.

He was an enemy.

The man fixed him with a calm gaze and spoke in a quiet voice.

"—You're Kane Blueriver."

Instead of answering, Kane threw himself aside.

If he'd responded honestly, he'd have been dead in that same moment. He knew that, somehow, with perfect certainty.

And the man moved simultaneously.

Two streaks of white light crossed the space between them.

The man's Psi-Blade seared through Kane's right shoulder. And Kane's own shot—

Didn't even graze him.

Kane's back went cold with fear. With his right hand out of action, the fight was already decided.

Then something occurred to him. Something he should have noticed immediately.

The man held only a Psi-Blade resonator. No headband. No booster unit.

"...Who are you!?"

The man ignored him. His right hand began to move—

"Don't move!" Milly's voice came from behind Kane, somewhere near the door he'd just burst through.

"Stop!"

Kane turned, fear still cold on his back.

Milly's aim was respectable—but compared to the man who had just shot Kane—

The man changed direction in an instant. In a single motion, he brought the resonator's barrel to bear precisely on Milly's forehead.

And then—stopped.

For the first time, something crossed the man's face. Shock.

"...Millennium...?"

The barely-audible murmur never reached Kane's or Milly's ears.

Milly had frozen too. She understood that the Psi-Blade was trained directly on her forehead. But more than that—

She was certain she'd seen this man before. She just couldn't remember where or who he was.

A moment of frozen time, filled only by the sound of rain.

The man moved first.

He lowered his Psi-Blade and said to Kane,

"The pirate base is on the sixth planet of the Vimes system. —Come. With Vorfeed."

And with that, he turned unhurriedly and walked through a nearby door, dissolving into the darkness beyond.

Kane let out a long, slow breath.

"—Do you know him?" he asked Milly.

She shook her head. "—No. But... I've seen him before. Somewhere. I know I have. I just can't remember where..."

She trailed off, and her gaze drifted across the floor—and stopped.

"—Merina... san...?"

At her whisper, Kane looked too.

A woman lay still on the floor. There was no need to check. They both knew immediately.

"...We couldn't save her. Again..."

Kane murmured softly.

Outside, police sirens finally cut through the sound of rain.

* * *

Now the Swordbreaker's control panels were alive with light.

After the events in the factory, they hadn't waited for Rail to arrive. They'd gone straight to the spaceport, taken a shuttle to the orbital port, and begun launch preparations immediately.

They'd contacted Rail from the shuttle and given him a quick summary—including the location of the pirate base.

"—Canal. Open all communication channels. Full bandwidth."

"What are you planning?" Canal asked without turning.

"Broadcast across everything that the pirates are in Vimes."

"I'd advise against that."

"Why? We're not the only ones who want these pirates gone."

"Destroying the pirates is fine—but if any of their associates hear the broadcast, they'll warn the base. The pirates might escape. And besides... 'he' is there."

"—He?"

Kane looked at Canal for the first time.

"You said Nightmare was here. It started moving some time ago. Away from this star system. I think—"

"It's also headed for the pirate base?"

Canal gave a small nod.

"If that's right, and if angry parties come rushing in from all over, they'll end up caught in our battle with Nightmare."

Kane thought for a moment. That was a problem.

"Then the man at the factory—was he with Nightmare too?"

Canal frowned. "A man... what happened?"

"There was someone at the factory picking fights with the pirates. He was using a Psi-Blade with no headband and no booster—just like me. I didn't get his name."

"A Psi-Blade without a booster!?"

"Yeah. I told you, there are people with guts out there."

"Guts alone cannot do this! Using a Psi-Blade without a headband or booster is physically impossible for anyone who isn't genuinely psychic!"

"...Well, the manual did say that, but... I can do it. It's exhausting, but..."

"Kane can only do it because being near me has amplified his psychic potential by an extraordinary degree. It has nothing to do with willpower."

Kane paused. "...Okay, wait. That man we met—he was doing it casually. Which means he's..."

Canal nodded quietly. "Either genuinely psychic—or someone very close to the heart of Nightmare."

"...Or maybe his Psi-Blade is just a newer model," Milly offered from the corner, eating another chocolate.

Canal and Kane both went silent for a moment.

"...That possibility... can't be entirely ruled out..." Canal admitted.

"...Way to deflate the atmosphere," Kane muttered.

He cleared his throat.

"Regardless—we're going to Vimes!"

* * *

On the galactic frontier, off the major space lanes, there was a star with eight planets.

The Vimes system.

With no significant resources and no suitable planets for habitation, the system had been left essentially untouched. On the orbit of its sixth planet—a small ringed world that had never even been given an official name—was what had once been an empty, unremarkable body.

It was that way no longer.

Some time ago, Laglude Corporation had, as arranged, ordered a freighter to change course and be lured into this system. That freighter had accidentally been shot down and had crashed on this planet—its impact gouging into the surface and sinking into something beneath it.

A massive underground dock. Inside: one unknown spacecraft and various components.

That was when this place became the pirates' base.

The spaceship the pirates named 'Death Cloud' had been deployed several times with devastating results—twice the speed of normal vessels, with incomprehensible offensive and defensive power. Every engagement against the trouble contractors Laglude had hired for insurance had ended in the pirates' complete victory.

Every engagement but one.

A pirate ship disguised as a freighter—complete with an SOS signal—had been repulsed by a single trouble contractor's vessel.

That loss had caused no real harm, and until today, everything had gone smoothly.

Then came the message.

Alzas Cornwell—the pirate chief—had been killed.

Word spread through the base before second-in-command Garay could think of how to contain it. The details were unclear—lured to some meeting, attacked by a single enemy, most of his men killed, Alzas himself dead.

What had arrived first at the scene was not any of their own ships coming back—but two interstellar police patrol vessels.

Rail, acting on Kane's tip, had directed the nearest patrol ships to head straight for Vimes.

"WHAT IS THIS!?"

In the base's control room, Garay stared at the dark blue hulls on his display. He didn't know how their location had been discovered. But he knew one thing clearly: sitting still meant being captured.

"WHAT ARE WE DOING, GARAY!?"

"This is bad!"

"QUIT PANICKING!" Garay bellowed. "Now that they've found this base, hiding does us no good! Everyone launch! Blow those police ships out of the sky!"

Whether this was the result of genuine resolve or simply his personality, he threw open the dock gates and launched seven ships—the Death Cloud among them.

The lead patrol ship was struck by the Death Cloud's main cannon before it could react, its electromagnetic barrier penetrated. It vanished in a blaze of light.

The second patrol ship retreated into the debris field.

More police ships arrived—four—only to be pinned down almost immediately.

"GARAY! Another patrol ship showing on the right!"

"Bring 'em on!"

The battle became increasingly desperate for the police. Six pirates against four police—with the Death Cloud in the mix, the disparity in firepower was overwhelming.

* * *

One pirate ship had quietly slipped away from the battle, circling the planet into a blind spot.

The captain wanted no part of Garay's suicidal approach. He ordered a course change—get out through the debris ring, get out of this star system entirely, and figure out the rest later.

The ship moved into the cloud of drifting rocks—

"...What's that...?"

On the display, one of the 'rocks' had an odd shape. And then—it moved.

"Energy signature appearing—what is THAT reading!?"

The Y-shaped winged vessel that had been playing dead among the debris looked up, its single sensor-eye gleaming with a cold, slick light.

The ship's crew never had a chance to identify what it was.

Nezard's needle lasers turned the pirate ship into a sieve in an instant.

* * *

The police were struggling.

The Death Cloud alone had already destroyed one patrol ship. A second had been blasted apart in concentrated fire. Now it was six pirates versus three police—a brutal imbalance.

Then—

Several beams sliced through the dark in rapid succession. One pirate ship erupted into fire and debris.

"WHAT!?"

"ENEMY FROM ABOVE!"

"A contractor ship—the Swordbreaker!"

The Swordbreaker swept through the pirate fleet in a diagonal run, its Psi-Blaster tearing apart a second vessel before the pirates could register what was happening.

Kane banked and came around for another pass.

"KANE! WATCH OUT!" Canal's voice was sharp. "THE 350-METER VESSEL IN THE CENTER—IT'S A LOST SHIP!"

"WHAT!?"

Kane yanked them aside. An energy bolt from the Death Cloud scraped past the Swordbreaker's hull.

"Tell me these things BEFORE they shoot at me! And that thing—is it the one you mentioned—!?"

"No! That one is just an ordinary Lost Ship!"

"There are 'ordinary' Lost Ships and non-ordinary ones!?"

"Later! Just be careful!"

The Death Cloud broke away from the fleet, turning to face the Swordbreaker alone.

"Oh? One-on-one!?"

Kane grinned.

The two ships charged at each other. The Swordbreaker was clearly superior in both performance and handling. When the Death Cloud realized it couldn't dodge effectively, it deployed its own psy barrier and tried to use sheer mass to force a collision.

Milly fired repeatedly, but the Death Cloud's barrier held.

Then Nezard appeared on the display.

The three-winged black vessel drifted into view from among the rocks, slow and inexorable as a nightmare.

"Three hundred meters. Mobile annihilation vessel—Nezard!"

"'The Spreader of Darkness is displeased,'" a voice sounded directly in the cockpit.

"So it hides somewhere and sends out a disposable proxy instead," Canal said coolly. "That's big talk from something that was sealed away so easily last time."

"How dare you—!"

Nezard's engines blazed. It crossed the distance between them in an instant, an acceleration that seemed to cut space itself.

"FAST!"

Kane wrenched them into evasive maneuvers. The two ships exchanged beams where each had been milliseconds before. Needle lasers from Nezard vs. Psi-Blaster fire from Swordbreaker.

Swordbreaker's psy barrier deflected Nezard's laser salvo; a leap-rail-gun from Nezard arrived a heartbeat later but detonated in empty space.

The battle was close—nearly even. Nezard had the edge in speed; Swordbreaker had more raw firepower and better defenses.

Then the Death Cloud joined in, firing at the Swordbreaker from the side.

"TWO ON ONE!?"

The two ships drove the Swordbreaker toward the debris field, hammering it from both sides.

"KANE! I NEED THE LEAP-RAIL-GUN!" Milly called.

"Canal—prep it! Milly—we need a precision shot, can you do it?"

They drove the Swordbreaker into the shadow of a large rock, weapons firing through the rock itself at random.

Neither the Death Cloud nor Nezard cared—they pressed in.

Then—the shot Milly had fired through the rock detonated between them.

A leap-rail-gun warhead.

The Death Cloud had no idea what it was. No one aboard had ever heard of such a weapon. A section of its engine housing—nearly half—was scooped out as though bitten away.

The Death Cloud ejected its engines. The engines exploded immediately after.

The Swordbreaker emerged from behind the rock and its Psi-Blaster punched straight through the Death Cloud's hull.

The Death Cloud was gone. An Explosion… a shockwave… then light.

At that moment, the last surviving pirate ship signaled surrender to the police.

* * *

Nezard remained.

"Useless wreck! Just another Lost Ship after all!"

It dove at the Swordbreaker, needle lasers blazing even as its hull vented flame and suffered small internal explosions.

"I'll give you credit for sheer stubbornness!" Kane called, and turned to face it.

"But I'm under no obligation to keep fighting you to the death!"

"Canal! Drop the psy barrier—eject the shuttle! Perform a forced separation!"

Explosive bolts fired. The shuttle flew clear of the Swordbreaker at close range, straight at Nezard.

Nezard tried to dodge and fire simultaneously—but at this range and speed, neither came fast enough.

Its needle lasers punctured the shuttle and continued on into the redeployed Swordbreaker barrier. The shuttle struck Nezard's hull a fraction of a second before Nezard could get its own barrier up.

There was an explosion.

Swordbreaker was blown backward by the shockwave, its psy barrier was still deployed.

When the light cleared—Nezard floated in space with one wing shorn away, its body riddled with damage.

"—Ghhhhhh..."

A low, inhuman groan sounded directly inside their heads.

Nezard's remaining engines fired. It came straight at Swordbreaker, still pouring needle lasers.

“Psy barrier off! Deploy amplifier chips—six units!" Kane ordered.

The chips arranged themselves at exact distances around the hull.

"Psy barrier on!"

The barrier crackled to life across all six chips at once.

"PLASMA BLAST—FIRE!"

The entire barrier blazed—and from it erupted countless arms of blue-white plasma that reached into space and seized Nezard's entire hull.

SHHHHRRRRREEEEEEEEEAAAAAKKKK!!!!

A death scream that should have been inaudible in vacuum—every person aboard felt it clearly.

And then—

Light. Soundless shockwave. Nezard returned to the darkness from which it had come.

* * *

"—It's over..."

Milly stared at the empty space where Nezard had been, and murmured quietly.

"...Yeah... a bitter victory..."

Kane exhaled with exhausted finality.

"...I'm not sure it was that grand..."

"—That's where you're wrong, Milly." Kane turned to face her with an unusual seriousness.

"...What's going on, Kane? Your eyes are really intense..."

"Listen, this is important. I need you to hear me out."

"...Okay..."

Milly nodded uncertainly.

Kane looked as grave as she'd ever seen him.

"...Shuttle craft are expensive."

"...What?"

"I mean—"

He directed his gaze at the void on the display.

"...This month, I might not be able to make payroll."

"...Bitter... that was definitely a bitter victory..."

Milly cried with her whole heart.

* * *

"Canal... talk to me. It's time," Kane said, turning to face her. "What's really going on between you and Nightmare?"

Canal looked away.

After a long silence—

"If I tell you... you'll have to fight Nightmare. Directly."

"...Ugh."

Kane hesitated. They had already destroyed two of Nightmare's Lost Ships. By now, their names were almost certainly somewhere near the top of Nightmare's most wanted list.

The phrase 'full-scale conflict with a galaxy-spanning criminal syndicate' was not one that inspired immediate enthusiasm.

Milly stayed silent throughout.

"...Sooner or later, the time will come when I have to tell you..."

Canal said it sadly.

"Which means..."

After a moment, Kane murmured,

"Eventually... we're going to be in a full-scale war with Nightmare. That's what you're saying."

Canal said nothing.

She stayed silent—and that silence was answer enough.

* * *

And so, one incident came to an end.

Though 'resolved' would be the wrong word.

When the Swordbreaker returned to the Winaran system, the news Rail brought was anything but cheerful.

The pirates captured in the 52nd Street warehouse had confessed to their arrangement with Laglude security chief Maligan Howell: receiving route and patrol information in exchange for money deposited into his private accounts.

But Maligan Howell had already died.

A traffic accident. Drunk driving, went into the sea. That was the official version.

With all negotiations handled exclusively through Maligan, the police couldn't prove the company itself had sanctioned his actions. The investigation eventually concluded with a finding of individual criminal conduct.

In the end, any connection between Laglude Corporation proper and the pirates remained unproven.

After all the follow-up mess had been sorted out, as Kane and the others prepared to leave Winaran, a man identifying himself as Laglude's new security chief came to see them. With a polished professional smile, he informed them that in addition to the contracted fee, a substantial bonus, ostensibly for their trouble, would be deposited in their account.

The implication, delivered in the most indirect of terms, was also a request for silence about any suspected connection between Laglude and the pirates.

Kane was tempted to say 'keep your money.' But he knew that doing so would cost Laglude nothing, it would only please them.

The interstellar police searched the pirate base thoroughly, but beyond the obviously non-human underground dock, they found nothing that could be identified as a Lost Ship. The surviving pirates claimed the components had been taken away by a group Maligan had brought in. Laglude denied all knowledge. The investigation stalled.

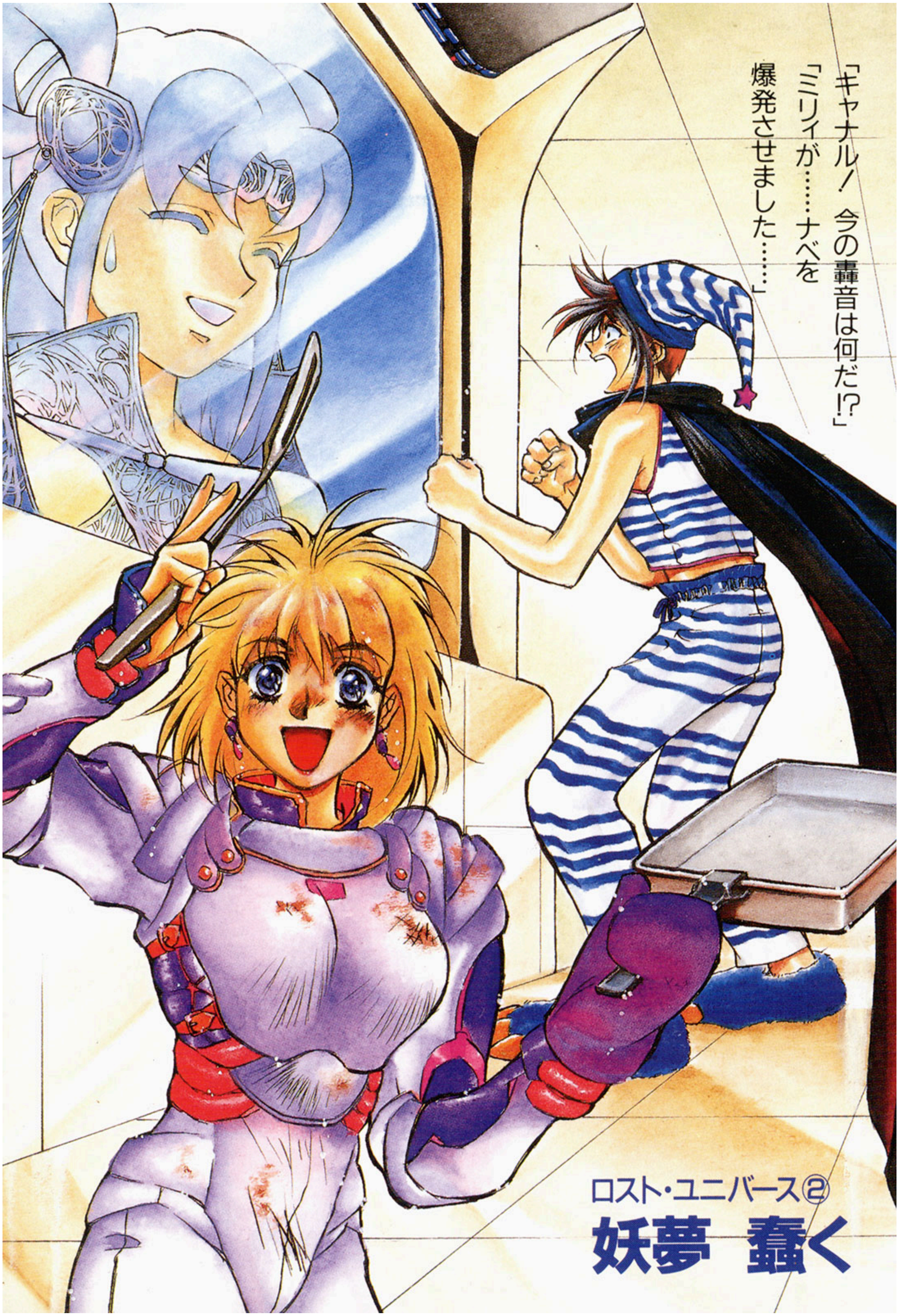
Perhaps in this whole affair, everyone had been dancing in the palm of Laglude Corporation's hand from the very beginning.

"...We couldn't avenge Merina, could we..."

Milly's quiet murmur hung in the cockpit of the departing Swordbreaker.

No one answered her.

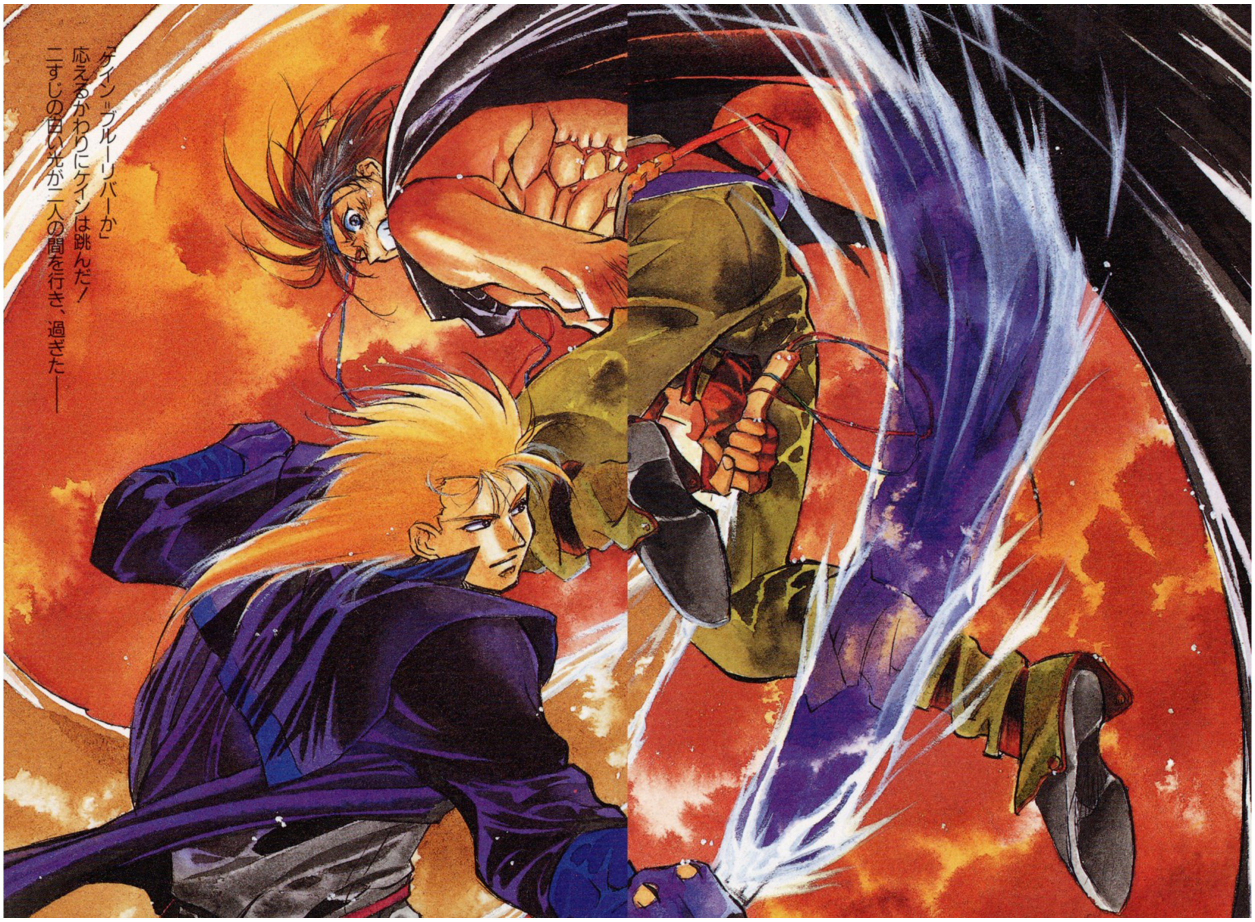
The end



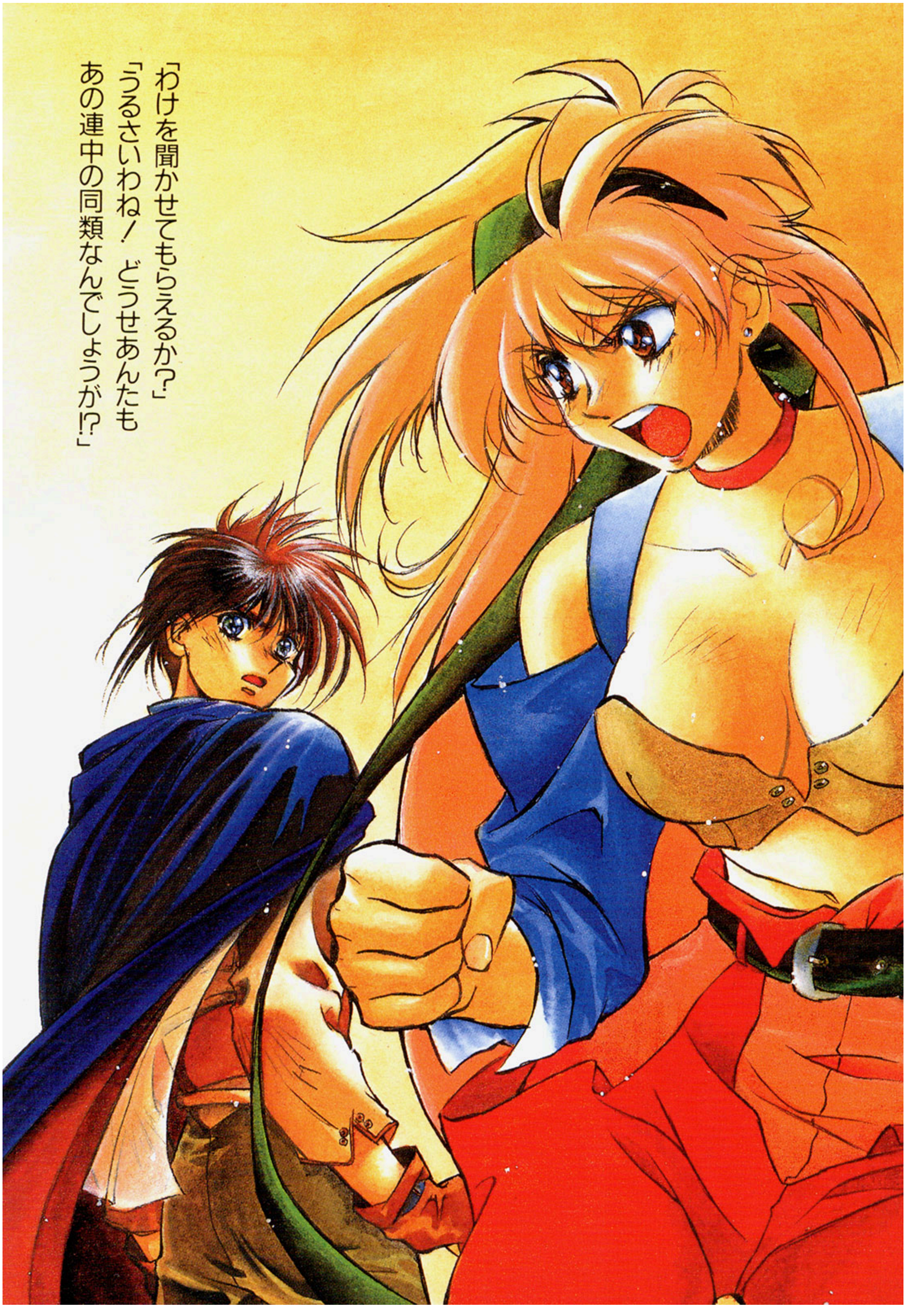
「キャナル！ 今の轟音は何だ!?」
「ミリィが……ナベを爆発させせました……」

ロスト・ユニバース②

妖夢 蠢く



「ケイン＝ブルーリバーか」
応えるかわりにケインは跳んだ！
二すじの白い光が二人の間を行き、過ぎた——



「わけを聞かせてもらえるか？」
「うるさいわね！　どうせあんたも
あの連中の同類なんでしょうが!?」